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Demographic, social and migration statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

Report on census costs

1. At the twenty-ninth session (New York, 10-14 February 1997), the Statistical Commission requested the United Nations Statistics Division to prepare a report on the costs of conducting a decennial census. The Statistics Commission requested that the report be prepared in collaboration with the regional commissions and be submitted upon completion to the Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination, the regional commissions and the heads of national statistical offices.

2. There has been little systematic cross-national study of the costs of collecting statistics, particularly through censuses. The census operation involves numerous agencies (units) of Government, the private sector, academic institutions and non-governmental organizations at various administrative levels. Indeed, it is partly because census activities extend beyond the routine operations of a single unit of Government and involve the contribution of many organizations that the full costs of a census cannot be easily determined. Frequently, the major and most readily identifiable costs, such as cartography, field enumeration, training, data processing and publication of reports, are explicitly stated in the budget. However, other resources that are required for a census may be contained in the budgets of separate governmental units, or else may be covered in a budget prior to the census date without their role in the census being explicitly identified.

3. At the request of the Statistical Commission at its twenty-first session, the United Nations Statistics Division conducted a study of census procedures, costs and staffing among 138 selected countries that represented a wide range of census experiences as part of its activities in connection with the 1980 World Population and Housing Census Programme. The study was carried out by requesting that countries provide information on practices for estimating staff and other resource requirements for censuses. Among the 75 countries that responded to the request, a substantial number maintained records of census expenditure by type and stage of the census operations. However, there was no uniformity in record keeping, and in most instances countries were unable to classify their administrative records in ways that allowed them to answer the specific details requested in their inquiry. The review of country practices also suggested that

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single cost indicators, such as total census per capita, are subject to a host of limitations, which make it difficult to say that one census is more expensive than the other.

4. Subsequently, the Statistical Commission made the following comment at its twenty-sixth session:

> "With respect to methodological studies, the importance of undertaking a study of the cost of population and housing censuses at regional level was mentioned. Based on the previous experience of the Secretariat, such studies were complex and the results could easily be misinterpreted. That was due to the great variation among countries in the way censuses were carried out in terms of use of personnel and other resources of national, provincial and local government departments, as well as volunteer enumerators and contributions from private sector. Consequently, the total cost was difficult to obtain on a comparable basis across countries."[1]

5. The Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) prepared a study entitled *Costing Aspects of Population and Housing Censuses in Selected Countries in the UN/ECE Region*.[2] The report was prepared by a group of rapporteurs on costing aspects of population and housing censuses set up by the Conference of European Statisticians. The study attempted to compare the census costs of France, Hungary, Sweden and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; it concluded that having collated the case studies, the group can only endorse the above-mentioned comment of the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session on the difficulty of obtaining costs on a comparable basis across countries.

6. Rather than compare census costs among countries, the Secretariat suggests that a more useful approach to the study of census costs would be to provide guidance to countries on ways to accurately estimate census costs in a systematic manner. The Secretariat proposes that a report be prepared along those lines for the Statistical Commission at its thirtieth session. The report would consist of descriptions of specific activities in the pre-enumeration, enumeration and post-enumeration phases, including specific elements that need to be considered in preparing a census budget and particular problems that may contribute to estimating costs.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1991, Supplement No. 5* (E/1991/25), para. 107.

[2] United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.II.E.15.